

Testimony of Jennifer Heston, President  
Michigan 2-1-1, Inc.

February 24, 2009

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee, my name is Jennifer Heston and I am President of Michigan 2-1-1. It is my pleasure to be here with you today to update you about the provision of 2-1-1 services in Michigan. As you may know, 2-1-1 is an information and referral service that can be reached by dialing 2-1-1 on your phone, just like 4-1-1 or 9-1-1. Michigan 2-1-1 is the official coordinating body for 2-1-1 services in Michigan, a designation that we received from the Michigan Public Service Commission pursuant to the Michigan Telecommunications Act.

Here with me today is Ken Toll, Vice President of Michigan 2-1-1 and the Executive Director of the United Way of Jackson County, and Sherry Miller, the Director of Michigan 2-1-1. Sherry has prepared a presentation that will provide an overview of the current services and operations of 2-1-1. Ken will share with you his insights and real-life experiences about the impact 2-1-1 is having on Michigan's citizens and local communities by efficiently connecting people with the services that they need. Given the current state of Michigan's economy, the need for services is truly great. But before I turn the floor over, I would like to take a few moments to highlight for you the tremendous success of 2-1-1 thus far, and our plans to continue expanding 211 to help ensure that Michiganders are able to "Get connected."

Michigan 2-1-1 was incorporated in 1994 and became a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Michigan Association of United Ways shortly thereafter. Michigan 2-1-1 consists of a Board of Directors with representatives from across the state, as well as a small

number of staff. The primary purpose of Michigan 2-1-1 is to coordinate the provision of 2-1-1 services being provided by regional call centers. Since its inception, 2-1-1 services have expanded to where it is now available to 72% of the state's population. Planned expansions for 2009 will extend coverage to over 84% of the state's population. While 84% coverage is a tremendous accomplishment, our goal, of course, is to achieve full statewide coverage within the very near future.

Statewide coverage cannot be achieved, however, without long-term sustainable funding sources. Thus far, the financial support for 2-1-1 services has come almost entirely from local non-profit commitments. Michigan 2-1-1 continues to seek funding from all available sources, both public and private, in order to meet its goal of building sustained and predictable funding for the entire 2-1-1 system. Local 2-1-1 call center investment combined with central operations in 2008 was \$4.1 million. Michigan 2-1-1 is squarely focused on diversifying its sources of funding and strategic partnerships in order to ensure that 2-1-1 services will be available for all of Michigan's citizens for years to come.

Like any other enterprise, we are also continuing to identify ways to deliver 2-1-1 services more efficiently. Michigan 2-1-1 has embarked on developing a comprehensive technology plan to better leverage technology to deliver 2-1-1 services even more cost effectively than we do today. We are also working to develop a more user-friendly website so that we can serve more citizens without increasing the demands on our call center specialists. In 2008, 2-1-1 centers received nearly 550,000 calls. With a growing need for services in Michigan due to our economic climate, we are already experiencing a significant growth in call volume in 2009.

Michigan 2-1-1 continues to be a good investment value for the state of Michigan and its citizens. A clear example of this is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) initiative. Michigan 2-1-1, in partnership with the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) and Community Actions Agencies throughout Michigan, promoted 2-1-1 as a tool for providing information about the EITC program. It is estimated that the Earned Income Tax Credit initiative returned nearly \$7 million dollars from the federal government to low-income individuals and families in Michigan. These are federal monies that often go unclaimed. Money returned to taxpayers can then be used to address critical needs and issues that individuals and families may be experiencing here in Michigan. If you would like more information about this initiative, please contact us and we will be sure to get you a copy of the report.

Expanded coverage, funding diversification, efficient service delivery, and proven results are all key components of Michigan 2-1-1's success. I am proud to be a part of what this organization has achieved, but there is certainly more work to be done to meet Michigan's growing demand to connect people with the services they need. We appreciate the support we have received from the members of this committee and urge you to continue to support Michigan 2-1-1 to help serve your constituents. We are, of course, available to answer any questions you may have.

At this point, I would like to turn the floor over to Sherry, who will provide a more detailed update about the services 2-1-1 provides.